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TEACHING OF LITERATURE*

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Since the publication in 1941 of J. C. Ransom's book *The New Criticism*,¹ the inclusion of I. A. Richards' name among those of the New Critics has been inevitably associated with criticism of the psychological aspects of his theory. Ransom's chapter on Richards was entitled "The Psychological Critic" and this was a label which soon stuck. Richards was strongly criticized, for instance, by W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley in their 1949 essay "The Affective Fallacy"² which quickly became an essential part of any New Criticism reading list. The two authors consider Richards responsible for confusing "the poem and its results", "what it is and what it does". They attack his aesthetic theory proposed in *Principles of Literary Criticism* because, like all other "affective theories", it is "less a scientific view of literature than a prerogative – that of the soul adventuring among masterpieces, the contagious teacher, the poetic radiator". They qualify Richards' much discussed – and misunderstood – concept of "pseudo-statement" as "a patronizing term by which he indicated the attractive nullity of poems". In spite of all this they have to admit that "the balanced emotions of Mr. Richards [...] have contributed much to recent schools of cognitive analysis, of paradox, ambiguity, irony, and symbol"³.

In line with the New Critics' reading of Richards' work, modern criticism has, so far, drawn from it all the principles and instruments useful for the analysis of the text and for the microscopic study of the language of poetry, and has ignored all the rest. It is not surprising, then – even if it is, indeed, paradoxical – that Richards' main contribution to the theory of criticism – his *Principles*⁴ – was, and still is, much underestimated both by Richardsian studies and by theoretical studies of literature in general. Even with the development of reader-response criticism this book has not been re-read with the degree of attention it deserves while, as I have already shown elsewhere⁵, Richards may very well be considered as a forerunner of this recent trend in criticism.

The words of the poem are read by the eye and set in motion a very complex reaction made of various mental events: visual sensations, tied imagery, free imagery etc.; these mental events are part of the impulse, i.e. "the process, beginning in a stimulus and ending in an act, during which one or more mental events occur"⁷. This means that each word of the poem is a stimulus that starts an impulse but it does not follow that its function of stimulus can be considered independently from all other stimuli and impulses.

In the same volume, in chapters XI-XV – which Richards himself defined as "a concise treatise of psychology"⁸ – he points out that in real experience single impulses do not occur (they are always complex), that stimuli are received only if they satisfy some need of the organism and that the mind is a system of impulses. The various symbols Richards uses for the mental events and the "web" with which he interconnects them testify his concern to underline visually the complexity of the reaction.

2) *The definition of a poem.*

Because of the complexity of the response involved, Richards arrived at the following definition of a poem:

This, although it may seem odd and complicated, is by far the most convenient, in fact the only workable way of defining a poem; namely, as a class of experiences which do not differ in any character more than a certain amount, varying for each character, from a standard experience. We may take as this standard experience the relevant experience of the poet when contemplating the completed composition.⁹

Such a definition could only be accompanied by the specification that it is indeed impossible to define a poem in a precise way:

The permissible ranges of variation in the class need (of course) very careful scrutiny. To work them out fully and draw up a neat formal definition of a poem *would be* an amusing and useful occupation for any literary logician with a knowledge of psychology. The experience must evidently include the reading of the words with fairly close correspondence in rhythm and tune. Pitch difference would not matter provided that pitch relations were preserved. Imagery might be allowed to vary indefinitely in its sensory aspect but would be narrowly restricted otherwise. If the reader will run over the diagram of a poetic experience given in Chapter Sixteen [...] he will see what kind of thing a detailed definition of a poem *would be*.¹⁰

How close, if at all, such way of defining a poem is to some theories of the most radical schools of reader-oriented criticism and of deconstructionism is not here of interest but it seems to me a very well balanced definition which stresses both the dangers of believing in the objectivity of texts and of holding the view that there are as many texts as readers. The impossibility of an objective definition, in fact, must not halt the enquiry, nor the confrontation between readers, nor, for that matter, the teaching of literature. I have heard teachers of literature wondering what to teach if there is no longer an objective text, or else what the aim of teaching literature is if there is not an objective valid interpretation. I find it at least encouraging to remember that Richards' success as a teacher, his contribution to the newly created English Tripos in Cambridge in the '20s, was the direct product of his theory and, therefore, precisely of his belief that there is not "something actual, *the poem*, which all readers have access to, and upon which they pass judgement"¹¹.

Having published *Principles* in 1924, Richards soon started his classes of "practical criticism" (his first classes on the subject were held in the academic year 1925/26). Their impact was immense and their results were published, as we know, in 1929 in *Practical Criticism*¹². Richards' biographer, J. P. Russo, writes that "Richards tended to apologize for the varieties of 'practical criticism' that his method had promoted" and that "the ever-growing clutter of glosses had come to pose a large obstacle for younger generations of students than the hegemony of historical criticism had been in [his] own youth"¹³. It is evident that with his influence on a whole generation of English critics (in the '20s and 30s – W. Empson and F. R. Leavis are only two of the many names one could quote), and with his move to the United States in 1939 where New Criticism was quickly to become the dominant trend, Richards' practical criticism was bound to undergo a process of change and adaptation according to the dominant critical theories, the aims of the various Educational Boards and Committees, and to the beliefs, aims and educational views of the individual teachers. The general tendency of these changes and adaptations has been to focus on practical criticism as textual analysis and to identify the aim of "prac-crit" classes in

providing the students with an improved technique of reading based on the knowledge of the main characteristics of the poetic language. This, in my opinion, is only one part of Richards' proposal and, in most cases, has meant the complete oblivion of the role of the reader/student and of his own "mental events" during the process of reading, appreciating and evaluating a poem.

The centrality of the role of the student/reader in *Practical Criticism* – in line with the theory put forward in *Principles of Literary Criticism* – may be shown, first of all, by recalling some of the conditions of the experiment: 1. the unknown authorship of the poems would make sure that the students' reactions would not be influenced by the provenance of the poem; 2. the anonymity of the commentators would encourage "complete liberty to express [the readers'] genuine opinions"¹⁴; 3. the one week's interval – during which the students would write their comments after having read the poem as many times as they needed or wanted – would grant that the teacher's reading of the poem would always come second and, therefore, confront itself with that of the students already fully and clearly developed; 4. as a result of all this Richards would lecture the following week (i.e. a week after the students had returned their comments) only "partly upon the poem" and "rather more upon the comments, or protocols"¹⁵ as they were called.

It is this last point, however, which shows particularly well the link between Richards' theory of literature and his teaching of it; Richards' starting point in both his classes and book of practical criticism were the reactions of the students to the poems. He organized his lectures around these and based his book on his analysis of them. He examined about 1,000 protocols¹⁶ and from them abstracted what he labelled as "the ten difficulties of criticism"¹⁷; they are either connected with or dependent on the following: 1. making out the plain sense, 2. sensuous apprehension of the words, 3. place of imagery in the poetic reading, 4. presence of mnemonic irrelevancies, 5. presence of stock responses, 6. reaction governed by sentimentality, 7. reaction governed by inhibition, 8. doctrinal adhesion, 9. technical presuppositions, 10. general critical preconceptions.

These difficulties are at the base of the Richardsian method of close-reading and, consequently, of much work of the New Critics.

Richards' analysis of sense, intention, attitude, imagery, metaphors, rhythm, tone and so forth, exerted a very deep influence on the New Critics and the ten difficulties of Practical Criticism have, since then, all become common property of modern criticism. Richards believed "that most of the principal obstacles and causes of failure in the reading and judgement of poetry may [...] be brought under these ten heads"¹⁸ and, no doubt, with his classes of "praccrit" he aimed at improving the students' technique of reading and at teaching them his method of close-reading but he also wanted to develop the reader's awareness of the mechanisms of his own interpretation and of Interpretation in general. (I would even suggest that this was Richards' main concern or, at least, that for him the teaching of literature was part of a wider subject "the theory and practice of Interpretation"¹⁹.)

The ten difficulties are, in fact, directly related to the six mental events of the diagram in *Principles*. This relation has not, as yet, been explored and when it is, it will be of considerable interest for Richardsian studies. Here, I will only list the most evident relations between the difficulties and each mental event in order to stress the centrality of the role of the reader also in *Practical Criticism*. After the "visual sensations of the printed words" on which all the other events depend, each mental event in the reader's mind is accompanied by more than one possibility of failure:

VISUAL SENSATIONS OF THE PRINTED WORDS

MENTAL EVENTS	DIFFICULTIES
TIED IMAGERY	SENSUOUS APPREHENSION
	TECHNICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS
FREE IMAGERY	IMAGERY
	MNEMONIC IRRELEVANCES

REFERENCES	MAKING OUT THE PLAIN SENSE
	DOCTRINAL ADHESION
	MNEMONIC IRRELEVANCIES
	STOCK RESPONSES
<hr/>	
EMOTIONS	SENTIMENTALITY
	INHIBITION
	STOCK RESPONSES
<hr/>	
ATTITUDES	STOCK RESPONSES
	GENERAL CRITICAL PRECONCEPTIONS
	TECHNICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS
	DOCTRINAL ADHESIONS
<hr/>	

The complexity of the reaction, as I said, made Richards define a poem as a class of experiences. Similarly, the risks of getting lost in one or more difficulties made him underline that misinterpretation is not "a mere unlucky accident" but "the normal and probable event"²⁰ and that "understanding is [...] an affair of degree, never so consummate as to be insusceptible of improvement"²¹. The obvious conclusion was, again, expressed in a conditional tense:

A perfect understanding *would* involve not only an accurate direction of thought, a correct evocation of feeling, an exact apprehension of tone and a precise recognition of intention, but further it would get these contributory meanings in their right order and proportion to one another, and seize – though not in terms of explicit thought – their interdependence upon one another, their sequences and interrelations²².

It is precisely because such a perfect understanding cannot exist that Richards proposed to make the "systematic discussion of the forms of meaning and the psychology of understanding" part of the English course²³. This he called "Theory of Interpretation" and, while admitting that it should be improved, he urged that "Chairs of Significs" or of "General Linguistics" should be established in "all"

Universities, and suggested that Theory of Interpretation should "take the foremost place in the literary subjects of all ordinary schools"²⁴. It would help the student:

By pointing out the systematic character of much ambiguity or by tracing the process of abstraction, for example, by preparing [him] to distinguish between those 'philosophical' utterances, which are really expressions of feeling, and statements that claim to be true, and by accustoming [him] to look not for one meaning but for a number of related meanings whenever [he] encounter[s] troublesome words²⁵.

All this aims to make the student aware of the mechanisms and limits of interpretation, understanding, communication, meaning, language and, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards would emphasize the main mechanism – and limit – of interpretation by pointing out that "thought is metaphoric" and that "the metaphors of language derive therefrom"²⁶. In line with his previous work, Richards was thus going "some way towards the deconstructionist outlook" even if, according to C. Norris, he was also implying "that a 'science' or logical metalanguage exists which can step outside the figural domain and survey its peculiar contours"²⁷. I am not personally sure that Richards shared the scientific dream of modernism, nor that he believed that language can survey language in a fully satisfactory way. Rather his pragmatism, his interest in man and his concern for the future of mankind, led him away from sceptical attitudes.

He was convinced that "opinion as to matters of fact, knowledge, belief, are not necessarily involved in any of our attitudes to the world" and that to bring them in is "a psychological perversion only too easy to fall in". He also believed that we need both a "clear and impartial awareness of the nature of the world in which we live and the development of attitudes which will enable us to live in it finely"; they "are both necessities, and neither can be subordinated to the other"²⁸.

Whether this is actually true and provable, I do not personally know but I find it reassuring and comforting, for the scepticism professed by deconstructionists towards meaning, logic, truth and the very possibility of communication can only be fought by an opposite attitude, a constructive will to communicate in spite of all the limits of communication, language and interpretation. As Norris ex-

plains, "Deconstruction neither denies nor really affects the commonsense view that language exists to communicate meaning. It *suspends* that view for its own specific purpose of seeing what happens when the writs of convention no longer run.[...] But language continues to communicate, as life goes on, despite all the problems thrown up by sceptical thought"²⁹. Richards' proposals for training in Interpretation, then, can still be considered worthwhile because, even if our present "clear and impartial awareness of the nature of interpretation" comes from deconstruction, "life goes on", "language continues to communicate" and we have still got to choose what to do – what attitudes to develop – in order "to live finely" – also in the context of our role as teachers.

The naïveté with which even experienced students are ready to accept without question their teacher's interpretations of works of art, his approach to literature, his teaching methodology, is undoubtedly a sign of the lack of such awareness. It is certainly very difficult to combat this if to do so one aims to make the students aware of the various mechanisms and limits of all the elements of communicative acts. Given the enormous progress of linguistics, semiotics, and psychology since Richards wrote, this task could only be met through new curricula and interdisciplinary approaches to literature. While working towards these larger aims, the individual teacher of literature could, however, start with a perhaps less difficult task. If it is true that setting an example is the most effective way of teaching, he could start by pointing out the mechanisms, limits and relativity of his own interpretation of works of art. The declaration and analysis of the principles of criticism which underlie his approach to literature and his teaching of it, together with the examination of alternative principles, seem to me the first and most obvious steps to take. Whether we shall ever take them depends on how ready we are to put ourselves into question, to put into discussion our role as possessors of knowledge and therefore to jeopardize our status within the teaching relationship.

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NOTES

* This paper was read at the Fifth Oxford Conference on Literature Teaching Overseas (1990).

1 Norfolk, New Directions Press, 1941.

2 *The Sewanee Review*, LVII (1949), 31-55.

3 *id.*, p. 31, p. 41, p. 49 and p. 46.

4 *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1924; hereinafter *P. L. C.*, or *Principles*, edition quoted 1970.

5 "I. A. Richards e il lettore", *Il confronto letterario*, II, 3 (1985), 153-168.

6 *P. L. C.*, p. 90.

7 *id.*, p. 66.

8 *id.*, "Preface".

9 *id.*, p. 178.

10 *id.*, p. 177 (my italics)

11 *id.*, p. 176.

12 London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1929; hereinafter *P. C.*, edition quoted 1973.

13 *J. A. Richards: His life and Work*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 216.

14 *P. C.*, p. 3.

15 *id.*, p. 4.

16 see J. P. Russo, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

17 *P. C.*, p. 13. The whole volume is devoted to the documentation, analysis and study of these difficulties but a satisfactory, if brief, description of them is at pp. 13-18.

18 *id.*, p. 17.

19 Richards never used this label but Part Four of *P. C.* seems to allow for such a coinage.

20 *P. C.*, p. 336.

21 *id.*, p. 325.

22 *id.*, p. 332 (my italics).

23 *id.*, p. 334.

24 *id.*, p. 335-337.

25 *id.*, p. 344.

26 New York, Oxford University Press, 1936; edition quoted 1976, p. 94.

27 *Deconstruction*, London, Methuen, 1982, pp. 58-59.

28 *P. L. C.*, pp. 222-223.

29 *op. cit.*, p. 128.